DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 128 CS 009 010

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TITLE The Hidden Problem: A Guide to Solving the Problem of Illiteracy.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 18p.
AVAILABLE FROM Minerva Press, Inc., 6653 Andersonville Rd., Waterford, MI 48095.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Educationally Disadvantaged; Functional Literacy; *Illiteracy; *Literacy Education; Reading Skills; Tutors
IDENTIFIERS Laubach Literacy Action; Literacy Volunteers of America Inc

ABSTRACT

Illiteracy, the inability to communicate or receive information through the medium of print, has not been dealt with effectively by society, yet it is estimated that there are 23 million illiterate adults in America. Two major problems exist: diagnosing illiteracy, and attracting illiterate adults to adult literacy programs. With the development of more sophisticated diagnostic techniques and the use of radio and television public service announcements, these problems are being overcome. Tutoring programs organized around a core of volunteer tutors focus on the basics of learning to read, concentrating on three word group divisions: (1) words that follow a predictable sound pattern; (2) multisyllable words that can be broken down into smaller segments based on the first word group; and (3) difficult words which are frequently used and must be memorized. Tutoring should maximize oral language ability so that the student experiences early success and continues with the sessions. (A list of resources and organizations dealing with illiteracy is appended.) (MM)

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Illustration by Jim Benton

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Published by: MINERVA

MINERVA PRESS INCORPORATED
6653 andersonville road • waterford • michigan 48095

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: April 1987

THE PROBLEM

Imagine. Twenty-three million American adults cannot read or write! That's shocking information.

Yet, if there are that many illiterate adults in our country, why don't we see more of them?

The answer may be that often illiterates hold good jobs and do most of the things everyone else does. They just hide their problem well.

You might think that adults who cannot read or write are clustered in urban slums. The truth is that they can be found in affluent suburbs as well as in depressed city neighborhoods.

- There are many more illiterate adults in America than most of us realize.
- Many people have serious misconceptions about illiteracy.

Because of the truth of these two points, we as a society have not dealt effectively with the problem of illiteracy.

Illiteracy costs our society billions of dollars annually in welfare, unemployment compensation, crime and prisons, unearned tax revenues, lost industrial productivity, remedial training in business and the military, and in adult and community education. But, it is the people victimized by this monumental problem who deserve our attention and concern. They also deserve our help.

For example:

> *One young man surprised his friends when he quit his job. He was able to get another job because he had a marketable skill and no one asked questions. Later, it was learned the young man had been offered an advancement. The advancement required that he read and follow a manual. Since he couldn't read and he refused to let anyone know this, he quit his job. To him, that was better than admitting he couldn't read.*
>
> *A woman looked like any other college-age person bound for a career or profession. She had a job in a factory and was referred for help because someone knew she couldn't read. It turned out that she couldn't read at*

a first-reader level.

A mother of a six-year old child came to a literacy office because her daughter was learning to read in school and the mother was unable to share books or help her child practice reading at home. She felt desperate, but she was unable to offer her child the one thing that could start her child on the road to literacy. She was unable to read to her child.

These three people are typical of the millions of illiterate adults in America. All of them need help and understanding.

A BASIC MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT READING

Most people assume that learning to read is easy and that all books written for beginning readers are easy to read.

Actually, this is a very erroneous assumption and the error can be easily demonstrated. Find a beginner storybook and a college text book. Make a list of the words that are in both books. After you begin to get a list, notice how often you see the same words in both books. You will also notice that these words contain only four or five letters, on average. Words like—*the, from, was, where,* etc. will be on your list. If you know someone who is a beginning reader, ask them to read the words from your list. You'll find that words like elephant are easier for the beginning reader than words from your list. In the sentence, "Where is your mother?", more beginning readers will struggle with "is" than will struggle with "mother."

The problem is that these "easy" words are very difficult to read and very frequent. No story can be written without these words. The result is that the nonreader struggles constantly with these words.

The net result of this observable fact in our language is that these function words represent a barrier for the potential reader. Once we get past this barrier, and most children do this in the early elementary grades, everything becomes easier. Those who do not make it over this hurdle find themselves trapped by the belief that they cannot accomplish what they have been led to

believe is simple. It is extremely embarrassing to live with the thought that you are unable to read words that you have been told are "easy."

Those who cannot get past the high-frequency words usually drop out of the competition because every page they look at is dominated by the words that highlight their experiences of failure. Not learning the high-frequency words leaves people feeling stupid and unsuccessful.

ILLITERACY DEFINED

Illiteracy is the inability to communicate through the medium of print. Illiterate people cannot read or write. Most have normal intelligence. They may have no problem communicating, so long as the medium of communication is oral language.

Typically, in our society, very little credit is given for becoming proficient in oral language. It is the written form of the language that somehow marks one as literate. Intelligence, that basic functioning of the brain that brings meaning to all of reality, uses oral language as its medium of exchange. It continues to develop even though it does not have access to the richness of printed information.

As a result, illiterates survive and many function surprisingly well. Most, however, pay a terrible price in terms of emotional burdens and various degrees of embarrassment and hardship. It is this embarrassment and hardship that we seek to alleviate.

IS THE PROBLEM REALLY NEW?

As we step back and survey the larger picture, we can begin to see how this whole situation evolved. We can see that this is not a new problem. The problem has always been there. It's the current scene that has brought this ancient problem into focus and exaggerated its impact.

You may remember Bureau of the Census figures that showed America to be more than ninety-nine percent literate. I remember reading and believing those figures. I also remember reading figures that showed Japan to be ninety-nine percent

literate. I remember how shocked I was to find that some other country was more literate than we. But, if those figures are accurate, how can we have twenty-three million illiterate adults in this country?

Jonathon Kozal, in his book, *"Illiterate America,"* points out an interesting piece of information. He says that the Bureau of Census, in stating that America is "virtually 100% literate," based its conclusions on written answers to a printed form. If we find it difficult to spot illiterate adults in affluent suburbs, can you imagine how unlikely it is that a governmental agency will be able to expose illiterates using a written form? This kind of misinformation helps us to believe that we suddenly have experienced a drop in literacy. It simply is not an accurate picture of reality. The illiterates were there all along. To find them, we must do more than send out a written form.

CHANGES IN OUR SOCIETY

Another major reason why the illiteracy problem appears to have come about so rapidly is due to the technological growth of our society. As machines take over labor-intensive jobs and as the computer makes its way into the center of our lives, the service industries replace the farms and factories, and the demands of people change very rapidly. Suddenly, people who were never called upon to read anything are expected to read printouts, service manuals and contracts. Even the person who may pretend to read the daily paper cannot fake the reading demands of the technological age. The places where one can hide one's illiteracy problem are becoming fewer and farther apart.

Faking it with the newspaper is even getting more difficult. Twenty years ago we used to say that anyone who could read at a sixth-reader level could read the newspaper. Recent readability checks of the newspaper show that most newspapers are written at an eleventh or twelfth-reader level. Recently, we picked up a pamphlet designed to help secretaries learn about their retirement system and found it to be written at a second-year college level. Getting the job did not require a college education.

Erratum:

4
7 Page 4: Jonathon Kozol's
name is misspelled.

THE CHANGING FACE OF ILLITERACY

We have discovered that people reading well enough to graduate from high school are barely literate enough to be successful in many occupations, to say nothing of the professions. Obviously, it is necessary to define literacy before we can count how many illiterates we have. That definition problem is insurmountable enough in a rapidly-changing society. The problem of how to put this test to the people of our country is even more difficult. Until we do that, we won't know how many illiterate people there are in this country. Consequently, what we have are, at best, educated guesses. Jonathon Kozol, in the book previously referred to, states that the estimate of twenty-three million illiterates is probably conservative. We have no reason to doubt his point of view.

Part of the present reality is that being literate is no longer reserved for a few people. If you go back one or two generations in our history, you find that most people depended on physical stamina and energy to become successful. Being literate was a prerequisite only if you entered certain professions. For others, it was a luxury.

This is no longer true today. In our highly-technological society, there is still a demand for physical stamina and energy but there is a literacy component to nearly every job one applies for. Many jobs require that workers follow manuals, follow printed specifications, or understand written contracts. Understandably, it is more efficient to write a manual that explains how to run or repair machines than it is to coach many people through the whole apprenticeship process. Also, it is impossible to put into simple print the volumes of information that are involved in machine-related tasks. Of necessity, these manuals are filled with technical terms and complicated sentences. It doesn't help that the writers of these manuals are often technicians with very little expertise in how to produce readable prose. Even good readers find these manuals hard to read.

TESTING PROGRAMS ARE MORE SOPHISTICATED

It is also important to remember that we have become far better at diagnosing reading problems in school. This, combined with the fact that very few children escape the opportunity to attend school, explains why we have become much more sensitive to problems in reading. In past generations, a student could fake a coughing spell when it was his or her turn to read and, of course, teachers often preferred not to press the issue because the unsuccessful student would soon drop out of school and get a job. As a result, children could go through the elementary grades without ever becoming proficient readers. In secondary school, they survive by listening to the teacher and pretending to be interested. It was enough to get them through. When they got out of school, there were many jobs where this deficit never became known.

All of this has been rapidly changing. Diagnosis in reading is becoming much more sophisticated. Whole programs are designed around reading-disabled children. If we are becoming so much more sensitive to reading problems, is not a natural outcome of this that we may begin to think that there are more children with reading problems than there were before?

ATTRACTING ADULT ILLITERATES

Fortunately, we are beginning to show real concern for the cause of adult literacy. Many literacy programs are being formed and are growing. Most of them are organized around a core of volunteer tutors who work with nonreading adults in places like public libraries. The major tasks of a literacy office staff are to recruit and train this core of volunteers and to attract illiterate adults into the program so they can be helped.

Attracting illiterate adults is the most frustrating part of the staff's task. Part of the problem, as has already been indicated, is the extreme reluctance of the nonreader to expose this very personal deficit. Complicating this problem is the fact that literacy offices cannot rely on printed material to communicate their availability. Illiterates do not get messages through print.

It seems so easy, for example, to negotiate with the administration of some local factory to include an invitation to private tutoring in the workers' paycheck. It seems like an excellent way to reach large numbers of needy people. The problem is that the very person whom you are trying to reach is unable to read the note.

The most effective way to attract illiterates is through radio or television public service announcements. Literacy office staff know when a spot has been aired on one of the heavily-listened-to stations. Their telephones begin ringing immediately.

Most advertisers admit that with all their best efforts, the best advertising is word-of-mouth recommendations. The same is true in the literacy effort. People who are too embarrassed to call the literacy office will allow a friend or a spouse or a parent to make the initial contact. These helpful caregivers may be able to read and may be the one who talks the illiterate into seeking help. If written announcements or offers to help are useful at all, it is because of these friends and relatives of the illiterate person.

Referrals often come into the literacy office from Social Services offices, Substance Abuse counselors, Health Service staff, agencies that serve the handicapped, parole officers and rehabilitation centers.

RESPONDING TO ILLITERACY

If you were to reach out to an illiterate person, or if you were to urge a person who cannot read to seek help, you would need to have some understanding of how to match up the need to the source of help.

We have been defining an illiterate as a person who has not learned to get information through the printed medium. If this is literally true, the illiterate cannot read at a first-reader level. Newspapers, menus, contracts, drivers tests, road signs, names on buildings, street names, etc., are all beyond the reading ability of these people. They may memorize a word or two that they see everyday, but they have no system for generalizing from the familiar words and letters to the unfamiliar. They may

recognize their own street sign, but that recognition has little to do with other street names and signs. Therefore, they are totally unable to follow signs to a friend's house. Most illiterate adults are so bedevilled by their inability to read that they freeze at just the thought of being called upon to say a word that appears in print form. What began as a cognitive task has now become overgrown with all types of emotional interference. The bottom line, however, is that these people are "nonreaders." They get no information through the visual form of the language.

NONREADERS

The true nonreader is the person that the literacy effort is attempting to attract. Tutors are trained to help adults make the connection between their oral language and the written form of the language. They try to help the nonreader develop a system for making generalizations from the known to the unknown. They try to point out patterns that letter sounds in words tend to follow so that they can use this knowledge as they confront a world of print. Most of all, they try to build confidence in people to try something that has always been a source of embarrassment and frustration.

POOR READERS

Nonreaders are not the only people who make up the ranks of the illiterate. Some illiterates have learned to read enough print so that they look quite literate. They are brought up short anytime they are called upon to read something aloud, however. They can read well enough to get a rough idea of the topic and some of the details, but they cannot translate print into a smooth flow of oral language. They cannot write or spell well enough to get a clear idea across and they depend on memory far more than they normally need to do.

These people can also be helped by the typical literacy program. The tutors are trained to teach each person at whatever level they need help. One person might know how to attack words in terms of their sounds, but they might need to spend time reading easy print that is full of the high-frequency words that are so difficult. This kind of practice, using materials

provided by the tutor, along with helpful suggestions about patterns in words, will help the poor reader develop confidence.

Other people helped by a literacy program are those who can read, but are not a confident speller or writer. The tutor might help this person become aware of some basic patterns. The tutoring sessions can be used to break technical words down into syllables and the usefulness of these patterns can be shown.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT ILLITERACY?

Not every person will want to or be able to be a tutor. However, everyone can support this effort by encouraging any known illiterate to seek help, and by being sensitive to the problem illiterates face. Becoming aware of the problem and being open to subtle signs may allow the illiterate to feel more comfortable about asking for help. Also, volunteers are always needed to help facilitate activities in the literacy office nearest you.

As a society, we all need to be more willing to take a positive approach to the problem of illiteracy. Rather than spending energy finding fault with the educational system, we need to keep in mind the changing literacy demands and we need to work toward a resolution of the problem with a positive attitude. We should concentrate on the complexities of the human mind and the many causes of failure and avoid any simplistic explanations. The problem is complex and it demands all the resources we can bring to it. A solution to the problem of illiteracy will cost money and we need to help our local literacy programs find that financial support.

If you find yourself drawn into the challenge to tutor an illiterate person, you will need to understand something about the way a person learns to read. Without going into great detail, an overview of the process may be helpful.

SOME BASICS ABOUT LEARNING TO READ

For convenience, we may divide the words we must learn or write into three groups. The first group includes words that follow a consistent pattern. In these words, the sound of letters are

predictable, for the most part, and whole lists can be generated of words that fit into "families." For example, words like: *cat, bat, fat, sat,* etc., follow a pattern and form the *at* family. Writing or reading lists like this help the beginner feel success immediately with a fairly large number of words. Consistent consonant sounds and the consonant clusters can be learned as part of this process. Students learn to substitute consonant sounds and create new words. This process forms the foundation for a system that the student will later use to attack unfamiliar words.

A second group of words builds on the first group. It includes words that have several syllables. Once the student learns how to break words down into their syllables, all the learning that took place in the study of word families, including consonant sounds, vowel sounds, consonant clusters, etc., applies to these syllables. Any word that looked formidable becomes an interesting challenge once the sound/symbol system begins to make sense. As frightening as a multisyllable word may be, breaking it down into syllables that follow known patterns is both challenging and rewarding.

The rest of the words form a third group. This group of words is the most difficult to learn. What is misleading is the fact that these difficult words are the 200 or so words that are used most heavily in the language. Because they are used so heavily, they are taught very early in school. Some teachers, and most students, mistakenly refer to them as the easy words. This is not only a mistake, this is probably the single most powerful factor contributing to failure in learning to read. The high-frequency words are the most difficult words and their frequency causes the student to be consistently confronted with failure. There are strategies that will help students memorize these words.

THE HOW-TO'S OF TUTORING

The person who agrees to try to help the illiterate must keep in mind that successful teaching always depends on the learner experiencing early success. To accomplish this, the tutoring should maximize the student's oral language ability. The stu-

dent's ability to get meaning through oral language must be the foundation on which early success is built. The first sessions should involve the tutor reading brief but meaningful selections to the student. Well-thought-out questions can be used by the tutor to demonstrate understanding of the selection. If the student is unable, even after adjusting to the situation, to participate in this sharing of common understandings relative to some selection presented orally, the student's problem may go beyond the tutor's ability to offer help. This will be rare. In most cases, these discussions provide a feeling of success and form the basis for dealing with print. They build upon the student's oral language ability and the ability to bring meaning to stories.

From the first sessions, students can also be introduced to words that follow patterns. These words also provide the student with lists of words that can be read or written fairly easily. As other words that do not follow consistent patterns are encountered, the tutor should write them down and point out ways to differentiate them from other words.

Thus the consistency of many consonant sounds can be introduced in the context of meaningful print. This awareness becomes a foundation for all subsequent experience with words. The generalizations that the student is helped to form while working with pattern words become the basis for encountering words that do not follow a pattern. All of this is supported by the encouragement that comes from being able to discuss meaning at a level that matches oral language ability. Eventually, this same experience of communicating meaning will come through the medium of print.

If a student has learned no system for linking sounds to the letters that are used to write words, it makes sense to emphasize writing the language at the same time that you work on reading the language. In the early sessions, the tutor should always keep paper and pencil available and write out any word that the student has difficulty with or shows an interest in. The tutor should use every opportunity to point out how words are formed and how to differentiate them. Students who have no confidence in working with print should be encouraged to use any method of writing they feel even a little comfortable with. The tutor

should concentrate on the language and on the patterns rather than on the habits of the student. After much confidence has been built, some of these habits may become the objects of instruction.

WHAT TO EXPECT

A person who is willing to volunteer time as a tutor must consider the time commitment involved. If you wish to make a significent impact, you must tutor at least twice a week, especially in the early stages of tutoring. Ideally, the person being tutored will practice some tasks assigned by the tutor and will commit some time to reading and/or writing everyday. Only by devoting significent amounts of time can the student expect to make progress. After the student can read independently, some time should be taken every day to practice reading. Regular practice brings about real growth.

One of the frustrations of working with illiterate adults is that the same negative factors that caused their plight continue to plague them even when they begin to experience success. As a result, they may stop coming to the tutoring sessions at precisely the point at which the tutor feels that success is becoming a possibility. Often, this has to do with circumstances that are beyond the control of the student.

On the other hand, adults who have made a decision to learn to read and write are frequently a pure joy to teach. They know what they want to do and they know why they want to do it, and they are grateful for every bit of help you can give them that moves them toward their goal.

WHERE ILLITERATE ADULTS CAN GET HELP

One potential source of help is the Adult Basic Education (A.B.E.) Program that is part of the school system in most communities. These programs are funded in the same way that the public school program, kindergarten through the twelfth grade, is funded.

Adults who are nonreaders, as we have described them in this booklet, may not find the A.B.E. Program as helpful as private

tutoring. However, some literacy programs send tutors into the A.B.E. classroom and offer tutoring there. This provides necessary help while the student continues to receive class credit.

Private tutoring sounds expensive; however, such tutoring is made possible by two national programs which use volunteers. These programs are the Laubach Literacy Action and the Literacy Volunteers of America (L.V.A.).

The Laubach Literacy Action Program provides rather complete sets of materials for the tutor who volunteers to help. The approach is based on phonics and presumes that the individual has no reading ability. It moves a student to about the fourth-reader level.

The L.V.A. Program also assumes that the student has no reading ability, but mixes phonics instructions with the "language experience" approach. It provides instructional suggestions rather than a complete set of materials.

Both of these organizations rely on local literacy councils to recruit and train volunteers. The local literacy councils also attract illiterate adults into their programs and match a volunteer tutor with each student. Careful matching and monitoring of the tutoring is essential to the success of the literacy effort.

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING MORE ABOUT ILLITERACY

BOOKS

Illiterate America; Jonathon Kozol, Anchor Press/Doubleday; New York: 1985.

Adult Illiteracy in the United States; Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman, McGraw Hill Book Co.; New York: 1979.

ORGANIZATIONS

Adult Basic Education
Regional Office Building #3
Room 5636
7th and D Streets, S.W.
Washington, DC 20202

American Library Association
50 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611

Coalition for Literacy
P.O. Box 81826
Lincoln, NE 68501
1-800-228-8813
1-800-228-3225 (In Nebraska)

4 A's Literacy Project
P.O. Box 81826
Lincoln, NE 68501

International Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road
P.O. Box 8139
Newark, DE 19714-8139
(302) 731-1600

Laubach Literacy Action
1320 Jamesville Avenue
Box 131
Syracuse, NY 13210
(315) 422-9121

Literacy Action, Inc.
201 Washington Street, S.W.
Atlanta, GA 30303
(404) 586-4960

Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc.
5795 Widewaters Parkway
Syracuse, NY 13214
(315) 445-8000

National Affiliation for Literacy Advance
101 Ostrom Street
Syracuse, NY 13210
(315) 422-9121

TELEVISION AND RADIO

PLUS: Project Literacy U.S.

An American Broadcasting Company, Inc. (ABC) and Public Broadcasting System (PBS) program which includes radio and TV programs and public service announcements.

PLUS National Outreach Office
4802 5th Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 622-1491